

# **"WE DOIN WE OWN TING!" REVOLUTION AND LITERATURE IN GRENADA**

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Today in Grenada, the long-submerged culture of the masses of the people is rising to the surface of our history through the development of structures which unlock the voices of our people from centuries of oblivion [...] in the 3 1/2 years of the Revolution alone we can boast that never before have so many Grenadians put pen to paper, never before have the voices of so many Grenadians been recorded in print.

Maurice Bishop (1982)

The most radical attempt to break through the encirclement of poverty, oppression and foreign domination in the English-speaking Caribbean took place in Grenada, from 12 March 1979 to 19 October 1983. It was foiled by the murderous split within the revolutionary leadership culminating in the assassination of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, who died along with dozens of fellow citizens. These circumstances made it easy for the U.S. government to complete its policy of permanent destabilization by invading the small Caribbean island on 25 October 1983.

It is the purpose of this article to shed some light on the literature produced during and after the revolutionary period. The social processes which made its emergence possible, and which in turn were reflected creatively in it, will also be recalled. Particular emphasis will be placed on the social function of revolutionary poetry and calypso, the art forms prominent from 1979 to 1983.

## **Grenada's cultural system: Historical developments**

According to George Lamming,

The history of a people's culture is first and foremost the history of that process of labour on which such a culture is

built; and a history of degraded labour will reflect itself in the distortions of a people's cultural formation (1984:2).

Literature is a small part of a country's cultural system. In the case of Grenada, the sectoral model developed by the sociologist Paget Henry (Table 1) provides a useful theoretical framework for our purpose.<sup>1</sup>

**TABLE 1. Sectoral model of the Grenadian cultural system**

LINGUISTIC SECTOR	BELIEF SECTOR	KNOWLEDGE- PRODUCING SECTOR	ARTS SECTOR
English	Religious Subsector	Educational Subsector	Mass Communications Subsector
Grenadian Creole	Ideological Subsector	Research Subsector	Fine Arts Subsector

Although the main focus will be on literature, a part of the fine arts sub-sector, its relationships to other elements of the cultural system, particularly to the linguistic sector and the ideological and educational sub-sectors, will also be examined. According to Henry, there are symbolic, as well as functional, relationships between the cultural system and the other sectors of society; culture reflects and/or interprets society and, at the same time, must respond to

three external constraints [...]: (1) the legitimacy demands of the dominant classes and the state; (2) the information needs of the production system; and (3) the identity maintaining needs of the population.

We will see to what degree those constraints were relevant to Grenadian literature.

Grenada shares with its Caribbean neighbours a "history of degraded labour" which has been characterized by the structural dependence established from the beginning of its colonization by the British and the French. During the 20th century, the United States eventually took over as the metropole. The Caribbean plantation society was rigidly stratified: the white planter class dominated the large slave population of

<sup>1</sup> As Henry's article "Socialism and Cultural Transformation in Grenada", on which I draw heavily in part I, has not yet been published, I am unable to refer the reader to the pages from which the quotes are taken.

African origin. Gradually, an intermediate mulatto class emerged. The colonial state reacted to the legitimacy deficits it encountered with physical and symbolic violence, the latter of which became more important after the abolition of slavery in the 1830s, especially in the educational and religious subsectors (primary education and Christianization). Thus, a hierarchical social structure was stabilized. A century later, the gradual political decolonization led to a liberal state headed by elements of the Afro-Grenadian population, notably Eric Gairy. This state required a new set of legitimizing ideologies, "a new political culture", replacing the racist notions which had been used to rationalize colonial rule with "nationalism, mass liberal democracy, Pan-Africanism and developmentism".

Gairy, who – like other nationalist leaders of the 1950s – seemed to embody those ideas, was very popular in the first years of his regime. But as the economic system, peripheral capitalism, did not basically change, the new ruling class was faced with a fundamental dilemma: as it was not really in control of the Grenadian economy, it was forced to make compromises with "old and new imperial powers" as well as with the local elites, which led to widespread disillusionment and the ideological "polarization around the capitalism-socialism alternative" from the late 1960s onwards. The extremely corrupt and repressive nature of the Gairy regime during that time accounts for the success of the New Jewel Movement (NJM), unequalled by any other progressive force in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

During Gairyism (1951-1979), the Grenadian cultural system experienced its biggest upheaval in the ideological subsector. Most of the other sectors did not change qualitatively: The Creole language gained more acceptance, but was still widely regarded as "bad English", the Christian churches received local administrative structures; the education sector expanded noticeably, but remained deeply flawed; and the mass communications subsector was placed under relatively tight state control, especially in the 1970s. In the arts subsector, there was "a significant increase in the appreciation of the art of the masses", above all, of music. The creative outburst of Caribbean literature in English, which started in the 1950s, also found some readers in the Grenadian middle class, but the small island itself contributed little to it.

In 1979, the performance of the highly dependent and export-oriented economy was disastrous: Unemployment reached 49%, the country's infrastructure as well as its education and health services had deteriorated considerably, and every social sector suffered under Gairy's mismanagement and the terror spread by his MongOOSE Gang. When the NJM, formed in the 1970s by young intellectuals, toppled the Gairy regime on

13 March 1979 in an almost bloodless *coup d'état*, the population greeted the "Revo" with overwhelming support.

### The educational policies from 1979 to 1983

The Grenadian revolutionaries were aware that tackling the cultural legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism – the "colonized consciousness" so poignantly described and analysed by Caribbean authors like Fanon or Lamming – had to have first priority in the process of developing their country. In this endeavour with the aim to create a truly alternative political culture in the English-speaking Caribbean, two opposing tendencies (pointed out by Henry) were at work: on the one hand, "the determined effort to end bourgeois domination of the cultural system, and to make the culture of the masses more central to the system", on the other, "the equally strong effort to increase state control over the system". The result – in the cultural sphere as well as in society at large – was "paternalistic socialism" (Mandle 1985:53 sq.).

The People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) concentrated its energies on the political and economical realms. For the cultural system, the importance of which was obvious underestimated, there was no overall concept. Only a limited mobilization took place, the educational, the ideological and the mass communications sectors being prioritized (cf. Henry). Therefore, it is not surprising that some of the most erroneous policies – restrictions on press freedom, confrontation with the churches, arbitrary arrests of opponents, real or presumed – were adopted in the cultural realm. Although these measures were provoked by various forms of destabilization (cf. Searle 1983), they contradicted the liberal political culture which the population had become used to and contributed to weakening the internal – and external – support of the revolution.

In contrast, the PRG's educational policies can be regarded, by and large, as successful and promising. In 1979, the state of the education system was dismal, even by Caribbean standards: Only a minority of teachers (30% at the primary level, 7% at the secondary level) had "received some form of professional training" (Bishop 1983: 45); many schools were in urgent need of repair; secondary education was expensive, and access to it limited; and many qualified teachers went abroad. Some "96% of all the children in our schools [were] failures in the education system at different points along the way" (Coard 1985:10). Functional illiteracy was widespread. The elitist character of that educational system is summarized in the fact that in 1978, only three Grenadians – children of Gairy and two other high-ranking members of the government – attended the University of the West Indies on a government scholarship.

From a "*commodity* to be bought and sold" (Creft 1982: 49; emphasis in the original), education was turned into a right for the whole people. Access to secondary education was facilitated by the gradual reduction, and the eventual abolition, of school fees. A new secondary school was opened in 1980, and more were planned. In the same year, 300 university scholarships were granted.

Through the Centre for Popular Education (CPE), a massive literacy programme for adults was carried out which, following the methodology developed by Paulo Freire, also aimed at the political "conscientization" of the population. It was very popular and showed tangible results. In a second phase, the objective was to deepen that process, allowing everybody to reach an intermediate educational level (the CXL of the Commonwealth Caribbean). Phase three, providing the opportunity for "a wider range of technical and vocational skills" (Coard 1985:20), never materialized.

In the primary schools, the work-study approach and the integration of school and community were implemented: One day a week, through the Community School Day Programme (CSDP), various community members taught their skills to the students. "We asked for and got farmers, singers, drummers, artists, carpenters, masons, accordionists, patois teachers, storytellers, boat builders, basket-makers, seamstresses, medical workers and others" (Creft 1982:58). On other occasions, the students would leave their school and visit farmers, fishermen, or agroindustrial companies. During the same time, the untrained teachers assembled at the National Inservice Teacher Education Programme (NISTEP) centres where their knowledge of the subject area and their pedagogical skills were raised by tutors and trained colleagues. This ambitious compulsory three-year training programme was also carried through full-time during the holidays. There were, however, administrative and motivational problems, and many of those rural schools "which had the most untrained teachers became, in effect, 'half-work, half-study' schools and serious deficiencies in literacy and numeracy began to appear to the concern of the government" (Thorndike 1985:109). Thus, the gap between primary and secondary education often persisted.

In addition, NISTEP started a curriculum development programme aimed at supplementing the totally inadequate teaching materials and building a new curriculum. This was, at the same time, an important "part of the overall process of mobilizing and *involving* teachers in changing the legacy of the neo-colonial education system" (Searle 1984:75/76; emphasis in the original).

The *Marryshow Readers*, schoolbooks in which the traditional stereotyping was avoided and the Standard English / Creole language situa-

tion taken into consideration (cf. Merle Hodge's explanations in Searle 1984:78-82), were the most prominent product of this effort.

The PRG must also be credited with attempting to stimulate a new, favourable attitude towards the Creole language, thus finding a balance in the linguistic sector. This was tried mainly in the new educational programmes: Creole was increasingly regarded as a language in its own right; consequently, a new approach to the teaching of English had to be developed. The introduction of Creole into the classroom was a truly revolutionary measure implying social acceptance. At the same time, the aim was to ensure that everybody obtained access to full literacy in Standard English.

However, as Hubert Devonish demonstrates, little systematic thought was given to the language question, leading to contradictory attitudes within the revolutionary leadership, even within the same individuals. The two basic positions can be summarized as (1) "they [the masses] must learn our language [English]", and (2) "we [the leadership] should speak their language [Creole]". Position (1) prevailed, and rather than envisioning a bilingual situation where "an attempt is made to provide access to all areas of national life in each of the two languages", the official language policies perpetuated diglossia. English continued to operate "as the official, public-formal and sole written language variety in the country. Creole was the language variety used as a means of everyday informal communication among the mass of the population" (Devonish 1986:137f.). Obviously, the PRG did not recognize the linguistic challenge and its vital implications to a satisfactory extent; paternalistic attitudes towards the "dialect"-only-speaking population were widespread. (It can also be assumed that one of the reasons why the NJM's ideological work among the people was not very successful lay in the difficulties of the abstract English terminology frequently employed.)

Education in a wider sense was at work in the development of new political structures – notably the Parish Councils, the Zonal Councils and the mass organizations – which aimed at including the active participation of the whole population. In this context, the ultimate lack of grassroots democracy and the prevalence of hierarchical structures – designed to guarantee state control – constituted a decisive deficiency. However, the nationwide discussions of the national budget, first put into execution in 1982, and intended to demystify economics (Coard 1985:21/22, 25 sq.), remain one of the most impressive examples of popular education and participation.

## Grenadian poetry and calypso from 1979 to 1983

As in all Caribbean societies, popular culture in Grenada is based on the oral tradition. In continuation of this, the dominant "literary" genres during the revolutionary period were performance poetry and the calypso. (It must be noted, however, that *writing* poems became a major activity in the educational processes mentioned above). Chris Searle's *Words Unchained – Language and Revolution in Grenada* (Searle 1984) constitutes the richest collection of that literature. None of the Grenadian authors represented in this anthology (except the calypsonians living and recording in Trinidad) were professional artists. Many of them were teachers or had some sort of academic background and belonged, like many of the NJM's cadres, to the relatively privileged educated middle class. Even if there was no literary infrastructure – as in industrialized societies or, in the Caribbean context, Cuba – with institutionalized mechanisms for the production, distribution and reception of literature,<sup>2</sup> the revolutionary poetry was spread to an extent unknown before, in newspapers, radio broadcasts or at political gatherings.

Linguistically, there is a variety of mixtures between Standard English, Creole and, in some cases, even Patois (the French-based Creole still spoken among the older rural population). Furthermore, influences "from Rastafarian and American black slang, from the Bible, from the new revolutionary lexicon [...] and from the effect of Latin American poets such as Guillén and Cardenal and the great Caribbean English-speaking poets like Carter and Brathwaite" (Searle 1984:122; emphasis in the original) can be detected. Many of those poems also have a definite affinity with Jamaican dub poetry. However, their character of resistance is not vaguely directed against "the system" or "Babylon", but concretely against the permanent threat to, and the destabilization of, the Grenada Revolution by the United States government. Much more frequently than dub poetry, the Grenadian revolutionary poetry is strongly affirmative and sometimes overly didactic; one underlying aim is in most cases to cause the audience to identify with the revolution.

The revolutionary poets liked to see themselves as "people's messengers", as founders of "a new body of literature in our country, which will be available for the re-education of our people", linking the "past with the present realities" (Chris de Riggs in Searle 1984:129). Like Garvin Nantambu Stuart, they demanded a departure from the individualist pose

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<sup>2</sup>Significantly, the Grenadian poet and storyteller Paul Keen-Douglas, who went professional in 1979, has been working and performing outside Grenada since 1974 (two of his poems can be found in *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse* 1986: 56-60).

regarded as a relic from colonial times: "In the past, the colonial theme of poetry was always 'I'. Now we must move to the collective symbol of 'we', of all of us uniting" (in Searle 1984:154). In revolutionary euphoria, they sometimes even equated their poetry, a "mass form of communication", with the "people's voice", as it were.

In this context, only a very limited number of the wealth of poems produced until 1983 can be touched upon. My aim is to refer to the most recurring and representative characteristics and topics.

The first collection of Grenadian poems during the revolution, *Freedom Has No Price*, was produced in 1980. It consists of two sections: "The long, hard night of terror", poems written during or dealing with the final years of Gairyism, and pieces celebrating "the new day of justice, freedom and equality". The authors come from all social and all age groups of Grenadian society, from 14-year-old students to housewives and an 81-year-old retired civil servant. Equally broad is the thematic as well as the stylistic range of the poems. The reality of underdevelopment and oppression under the neo-colonial Gairy regime is evoked and denounced both in general terms ("The Wretched of the Earth" by Chris de Riggs) and in concrete descriptions made in vivid Creole:

Nanci-Story, Nanci-Story, Nanci-Story.  
 Everyday a price ah food going up high, high, high.  
 The poorman suffering is tight, tight, tight,  
     Nanci-Story.  
 Woman bawling, can't buy baby food  
 While richman everyday buying puppy food.  
     Nanci-Story.  
 [...]
 No more big belly, no more prostitution, no more  
 poverty, no more unemployment, we want is  
 free and just society!!  
     Nanci-Story.

NO Nanci-STORY NAH. ALL THAT IS THE TRUTH!!<sup>3</sup>

The long enumeration of "unbelievable" grievances (underlined by the constant interjection of "Nanci-Story") triggers off, quite logically, the final popular outcry for change. Another aspect under attack in this section of protest poetry is Britain's complicity with Gairy, visible in the military parades on Queen's birthday (cf. Caldwell "Kwame" Taylor's biting anti-colonial satire "Untitled").

Gairy's fall on 13 March 1979 is greeted and celebrated in more than a dozen pieces, and the anthology closes on some of the themes which

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<sup>3</sup>Ian ST. BERNARD, "Nanci-Story", *Freedom*, p. 13.



dominated the revolutionary discourse until 1983: internationalism, production, education and destabilization.

During the literacy campaign organized by the Centre for Popular Education, more poems – although very few of outstanding quality – were written in situations comparable to the collective processes in the Nicaraguan *talleres de poesía* (poetry workshops). It has to be borne in mind, however, that the function of this kind of poetry was primarily pedagogical. It served as a medium to encourage learners to make more conscious use of their language and to propagate the educational policies carried out by the CPE. Many examples of it are represented in the 1981 anthology *Tongues of the New Dawn*:

To be educated's  
a basic right  
we fought for this into all our might  
each one teach one  
to read and write  
come out and join the CPE  
Learn to read and be free.<sup>4</sup>

The message is straightforward. The whole poem, which was turned into a song, like many others, is basically a variation of the main slogans of the educational programme, urging the audience to participate in it.

More elaborate attempts to copy European-style heroic poetry seem out of place:

'Tis Education's Potent Arm  
That shields us from oppression's harm.  
That guides our feet in freedom's way.  
And fabrics rare that ne'er decay.<sup>5</sup>

Other Grenadian poets found much more original ways of dealing with the history of their country, like Chris de Riggs – the PRG's minister of health – in his epic "Jookootoo I". From the perspective of a native labourer, the most poignant phases of Grenadian history from the arrival of the British colonizers to the revolution are recalled: slavery with African women cursing the slavers, the hardships of work in the cane-fields, Fedon's aborted rebellion of 1795, the beginnings of nationalism in the 1930s connected with the names of A.T. Marryshow and "Buzz" Butler, World War II with West Indians fighting for an ungrateful Empire, the hopes and disillusion of Gairyism. Powerful images, captivating the vitality of the people's resistance to colonialism, are put forward in Creole. The protagonist voices his emotions in lively, sometimes drastic language:

<sup>4</sup>Waltham Junior Secondary School, "Join CPE", *Tongues*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup>CPE Brigade Carriacou, "'Tis Education's Potent Arm", *Tongues*, p. 64.

Jookootoo I who wet me pants March 13th '79  
 and hide like hell for days  
 Singing Our Fadder, Haily Mary  
 Lord oh Lord please bring back Gairy  
 But is two years since the Revo come  
 and ah could still drink me rum  
 Dey en close de church  
 Dey en take one sheep  
 ah ha me wuk  
 an ah still could sleep  
 Me son gone and study engineer  
 ah getting free milk an house repair  
 Is only now I seeking how dis Revo good for de poor  
 an ah dam sorry it didn't come before  
 De Revo run me Fadder, is true  
 But me Godfadder treating me better  
 Thank you.<sup>6</sup>

The poet's choice of the contemporary Jookootoo is particularly effective: it is not the heroic, fully "conscious" revolutionary of other, more clear-cut poems, but a sceptical, religious person with anti-communist fears who turns into a supporter of the "Revo" because of the social gains he has obtained.<sup>7</sup>

Merle Collins is another author who skillfully celebrates different aspects of a new self-confidence attained through the revolution. The forging of a national historical consciousness as opposed to the indoctrination in colonial schools is proclaimed in "The Lesson". "Great Grand-mammy" and "Grannie", who remember meticulous details about William the Conqueror's family and the geography of the Arctic Ocean, had received no instruction about Caribbean history and geography. At last, and in the memorable imaginary meeting of heroes old and new, things are put in a perspective relevant to the people:

And now  
 We  
 Consciously  
 Anti-colonial  
 Understanding all dat  
 And a little more  
 Will cherish  
 Grannie's memory

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<sup>6</sup>in SEARLE 1984:125.

<sup>7</sup>For a lively description on how de Riggs performed this poem at a Parish Council meeting, cf. HODGE/SEARLE 1981:4 sq.

And beckon William across  
 To meet and revere  
 Our martyrs  
 Fedon  
 And Toussaint  
 And Marryshow  
 And Tubal Uriah Buzz  
 Butler  
 And the countries  
 And principles  
 They fought for  
 We  
 Will watch  
 William's astonished admiration  
 As he humbly meets  
 Fidel  
 As  
 In a spirit's daze  
 He greets the PRG  
 We will move  
 Even closer [...]

In this beginning  
 We  
 Will rewrite  
 De history books  
 Put William  
 On de back page  
 Make Morgan  
 A  
 footnote  
 Grannies to come  
 Will know  
 Of de Arctic Ocean  
 But will know more  
 Of the Caribbean Sea  
 Of the Atlantic Ocean

We  
 Will recall with pride  
 Our own  
 So  
 Goodbye William  
 Good

Riddance  
 Welcome  
 Fedon  
 Kay sala sé sa'w  
 Esta es  
 su casa  
 This is  
 your home!<sup>8</sup>

Subject, rhythm and structure of this poem, with its short lines creating a particular intensity, recall E.K. Brathwaite's work. The poem ends on a Pan-Caribbean note, with the same sentence – welcoming the “real” heroes – in Patois, Spanish and English. In “Callaloo”, Merle Collins celebrates the Grenadians' new pride, and in “The Butterfly Born”, the transformation of the Grenadian woman from a timid, oppressed being into someone conscious of her worth and her equal rights.

Women's liberation is portrayed as a goal, and sometimes as a success in several other poems, by both female and by male authors. Usually, difficulties are not voiced; rather, the positive present is favourably compared to the past.

Raising the levels of production – another central effort of the PRG – features prominently in the revolutionary poetry. Again, the best of those poems are written in Creole, the people's language, and go beyond the repeating of slogans:

Now Brudder Man  
 War you doing?  
 Life en no joke;  
 Is not only  
 Smoke, smoke, smoke.

Come on man  
 And you woman too;  
 Forget the I-la-loo;  
 Take me hand,  
 Together let's work the land.

Production  
 Muss build this nation:  
 What we grow  
 Dat we go eat,  
 Dat go be  
 Sweet, sweet, sweet;

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<sup>8</sup>COLLINS 1985:21f. This poem is also reproduced in SEARLE 1984:138 sq. and in *Callaloo* 1984:44 sq.

Real sweet.

So come on man  
Let's work the land;  
That is our plan,  
Ah good plan  
Brudder Man.<sup>9</sup>

The work ethics of the hard, "honest" peasant are used to appeal to young people, particularly to the Rastas, to join the national efforts in agriculture (Christine David's "Mr. Idle Hand" attempts the same). "I-la-loo", a pun on the Rasta prefix I, is an example for the teasing tone of the poem; the message comes across very effectively in the short lines Gebon says he uses because they so much resemble spoken language.

Gebon's poem hints at the PRG's problematic relationship with the Rasta community. Although many Rastas, who had been victimized under Gairy, supported the revolution or even had joined the ranks of the People's Revolutionary Army (PRA), a smaller part of them drifted into opposition, partly because of the government's strict attitudes concerning the cultivation and sale of marihuana. These tensions were exploited by the right-wing opposition: in October 1979, the newspaper *Torchlight* tried to provoke a confrontation between Rastafarians and the PRG. The government overreacted and closed the paper down. The split in the Rasta community deepened, and in July 1981, 76 people – many Rastas among them – were arrested, but never put on trial. These repressive measures, apparently pushed through by hardliners around Bernard Coard and initially opposed by Maurice Bishop, reveal the deficiencies of the PRG in dealing with culturally distinct sectors of the population, and certainly weakened its popular base (for more details, cf. Clark 1987:25 sq.; Campbell 1987:162 sq.).

A further subject area which has inspired some good poetry is the antagonistic relationship between Grenada and the U.S. government whose policies of destabilization took a variety of forms, systematic disinformation being one of the most important ones. The poetic response includes attacks on Ronald Reagan (e.g. Garvin Nantambu Stuart's "Cowboy Gun for Revolution Town"; Chris de Riggs' "The Last Cowboy"), on the U.S. military who were rehearsing the Grenada invasion two years before it actually happened and their complices in the country itself on imperialism worldwide. The powerful rhythms of Helena Joseph's "I Militia", addressed to "Mr. Exploiter", made it one of the most popular poems of its kind:

You spread propaganda

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<sup>9</sup>Renalph GEBON, "The Plan", in SEARLE 1984:156.

About Grenada  
 Through the media  
 And newspaper  
 Saying how we doh ha  
 Human rights in Grenada  
 And how we mustn't frien with Cuba  
 Asking them passenger  
 When they coming to Grenada  
 'Where are you going to, Grenada?  
 Don't go over there  
 Is guns cover the whole area!  
 And how Grenada is a disaster  
 How e have a big boat load ah dead soldier  
 Stinking in the harbour  
 Just come out and fight war in Nicaragua.<sup>10</sup>

The poet denounces the attacks on a diplomatic as well as on a propagandistic level which accompanied the revolution from the very beginning of its existence. In official statements by the U.S. administration, in press reports and through rumours, Grenada was presented as a totalitarian, militaristic Soviet outpost in the Caribbean bent on subverting the entire area.

Another outstanding author was Jacob Ross, whose poems centre on the peasants' and workers' lives and attitudes. Having studied linguistics, Ross was aware that Creole as his "own language [...] can be a vehicle of thoughts, sentiments – and also ideas and abstracts that are as complex and profound as any in any other language". From writing what he called "self-righteous and self-centred outpourings", influenced by English models (in Searle 1984:134 f.), he moved to poems celebrating and, sometimes, idealizing the folk:

look there  
 is a fisherman standing  
     dark as a rock  
     wid sun in he eyes  
 muscles hard and tarred as rope  
 he foot plant firm longside he boat  
 he raise he voice he shout an' say  
 'de right is mine to work an' hope  
     dis sea is ours  
     dis place, we home  
 an' every drop of salt we own

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<sup>10</sup>in SEARLE 1984:162.

I know da I am not alone'.<sup>11</sup>

The strong rootedness and pride of the fisherman, characteristic of the kind of patriotism found among the Caribbean working people, is captured in a few simple lines.

Sometimes, as in the case of Michael "Senator" Mitchell, the reciting of the poetry was accompanied by drums and had the audience join in, clapping:

Whether is a party  
 Whether is a movie  
 We goin for the taxi  
 Like we always in a hurry  
 We pushing, pushing  
 We just pushing, pushing  
 That big fat Mister  
 With his broad iron shoulder  
 Trample on his sister  
 Just to get in before her  
 We pushing we father  
 We pushing we mother  
 We pushing we brother  
 We pushing we sister  
 I wonder what's the matter  
 If we getting further  
 With this animal character  
 We just pushing one another  
 [...]  
 Grenadians get in the line  
 The process will be faster  
 Pushing never  
 Let us advance to Discipline  
 Stop all the pushing, pushing  
 Down with the pushing!<sup>12</sup>

The irresistible rhythm of the poem is a good device for making the open didacticism at the end quite bearable. This poem is also a representative example of little, everyday incidents being taken up humourously and commented upon.

Whereas the kind of performance poetry presented so far was generated by the reality of the revolution and can be regarded, because of its vigour and its dimension, as a new social phenomenon, another art form related to it could look back on a relatively long tradition: the calypso.

<sup>11</sup>"Grenada is not Alone", in SEARLE 1984:133.

<sup>12</sup>"Stop the Pushing", in SEARLE 1984:165f.

The calypso, whose centre has been Trinidad, is a working-class form of artistic expression throughout the English-speaking islands of the Eastern Caribbean. There, the Grenada revolution, which was regarded as a hope for the whole region, triggered off a series of calypsos in its support. Several Grenadians living in Trinidad joined in, among them the famous Mighty Sparrow who, in his "Wanted Man", celebrated Gairy's, Idi Amin's, Somoza's and the Shah's downfall. In Grenada itself, the emphasis of the calypso lyrics shifted from social commentary to revolutionary propaganda. There were still "traditional", ballad-like calypsos, e.g. Mighty Timpo's "Soft-Head Preacher", telling the story of a preacher who tries to convert a calypsonian, but ends up being "converted" to calypso himself.

On the other hand, the progressive tradition of the group *We Tent*, who had supported the NJM's struggle against Gairy from 1977 to 1979, developed into a broad movement which enjoyed the full backing of the PRG. (Presumably, non-revolutionary calypsonians must have had a hard time: Flying Turkey's episode of the audience's hostile reaction to "a tune commenting on some trivial problems" which could be interpreted as a critique of government policies (Searle 1984:225) makes it seem unlikely that people could sing about anything they wanted). Regional festivals were organized, the outlook became more global, and women, youth and children joined the movement.

Thematically, all of the topics mentioned above reappear in the calypso lyrics. Lord Prim explained the purpose of economic diversification, high on the government agenda, in the following chorus lines:

And I shout out, 'Johnny, give me a piece of we saltfish!'  
 He say, 'No, no, no Mister, you can't get it so!'  
 And I shout out, 'Johnny kindly give me a piece of we local  
 saltfish!'  
 He shout, 'No, no, no Mister, you can't get it so!'  
 He told me this saltfish was made in Grenada locally  
 So spend your money and help to build your country.<sup>13</sup>

In this case, the artist does not preach directly, but he very skilfully uses the device of a narrator who is enlightened by "the feller" "Johnny" pointing out the advantages of import-substituting production.

The final lines of Flying Turkey's programmatic "Voice of my People" are a good example of the directly political calypso:

Chant 'Forward ever! Long live our leader!  
 Long live Caribbean people, fight on for your victory!  
 Never fall for political games and hypocrisy.  
 While some governments tell their people they care

<sup>13</sup>in SEARLE 1984:196f.



Their democracy is five seconds in five years!  
 'Take out the beam from your own eyes', it is said,  
 Forget my country, it's theirs that really dread –  
 And we realise it's our progress that they despise!<sup>14</sup>

Revolutionary slogans, Maurice Bishop's rebuttal of the "Westminster democracy",<sup>15</sup> the biblical image denouncing hypocritical arrogance, and the Rasta term "dread" turned against the U.S. form a compact version of much of the official ideology. Often and – in a country under siege – understandably, this mode of thinking was somewhat manichaeian in its character, fomenting intolerance and repression.

Other forms of cultural expression which have to be mentioned here are J'Ouvert Carnival, which, according to a 1982 article in the *Free West Indian*, underwent "a dramatic change from the vice and immorality for which it had become characteristic, to its old political and satirical flavour" (in *In Nobody's Backyard* 1984:122), and the flourishing of revolutionary drama, with the formation of a number of new groups.

In spite of the wide thematic, linguistic and qualitative range covered by Grenadian performance poetry, calypso and the intermediate forms using the accompaniment of drums, they shared a common ideological function: They moved, to use Henry's concepts, between the legitimacy demands of the revolutionary state and the identity maintaining (or creating) needs of the population. This was not necessarily a contradiction and at their best, they raised people's self-esteem and stimulated their active involvement in the social process, providing excellent entertainment at the same time. However, it can be doubted whether the excessive sloganeering of some poems did actually promote these goals. By making prolific use of the Creole language, the artists conveyed a new, widely accepted status to it, communicating with the audience to an extent unknown before. The frequent performance became a new, exciting feature of a strengthened popular culture shared by small and large crowds. As a phenomenon unique in the history of Grenada and the entire Caribbean, they are indicative of the creative energies released by the revolution, especially by its educational policies.

Altogether it can be assumed that this literature, as a part of the cultural system, played a positive role in the PRG's attempts to create a new political culture. But it was not enough to counterbalance the particular problems the state policies met in the ideological, religious

<sup>14</sup>in SEARLE 1984:214f.

<sup>15</sup>"And we speak of democracy [...] we don't just see the question of elections as being democracy but we see democracy as having much more than a just a tweedledum and tweedledee election, more than just a rum and cornbeef convention, more than just a five seconds in five years right to put an X" (BISHOP 1984:188).

and mass communications subsectors (cf. Henry). The overall progress in transforming the cultural system was modest. The legacy of colonialism with its "psychology of dependence which has crippled the imagination and makes it inoperative in moments of crisis" was identified by George Lamming as one fundamental cause underlying the Grenadian tragedy: the revolutionaries

were the first men of their generation who had attempted to make a decisive break, a fundamental departure from the old colonial legacy, and who had the power to consolidate that break. But there was no history within their own political culture which they could follow (Lamming 1983:9,12).<sup>16</sup>

This burden, distinguishing Grenada from countries like Cuba and Nicaragua whose governments successfully coped with much greater external pressures, accounts for the ideological rigidity prevailing in the NJM and for the final disaster.<sup>17</sup>

### Literary responses to revolution and invasion (1983–1987)

The traumatic experiences of the revolution's "suicide" (Fidel Castro) and of the subsequent U.S.-led invasion were echoed in the work of Caribbean poets such as Dionne Brand, Lasana M. Sekou, Nancy Morejón, Jesús Cos Causse, Audre Lorde, Andrew Salkey, Brother Resistance, Elean Thomas, and Mighty Sparrow. Significantly, their anger, protest and sadness could only be voiced outside Grenada. CIA units of psychological

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<sup>16</sup>Jan Carew, in his narrative history *Grenada: The Hour Will Strike Again*, similarly sees the Coard faction as "victims of a crippling and colonial heritage of psychological dependence. They clung to rules with a passion bordering on idolatry. They saw those rules as eternal biblical truths in a catechism of revolution" (CAREW 1985:264). On the other hand, V.S. NAIPAUL (1984:72), while also pointing out this phenomenon, is predictably hostile to the revolution and draws the conclusion that it was doomed to failure all along: "The revolution depended on language. At one level it used big, blurring words; at another, it misused the language of the people. Here the very idea of study – a good idea, associated in the minds of most Grenadians with self-improvement – had been used to keep simple men simple and obedient [...] The revolution was a revolution of words. The words had appeared as an illumination, a short-cut to dignity, to newly educated men who had nothing in the community to measure themselves against and who, finally, valued little in their own community. But the words were mimicry. They were too big; they didn't fit; they remained words".

<sup>17</sup>For detailed analyses of the events of October 1983, cf. *Generalprobe Grenada* 1984; MANDLE 1985; SCHOENHALS/MELANSON 1985; THORNDIKE 1985; LEWIS 1987; and MARABLE 1987.

warfare helped to push the Grenadian popular culture underground and its most prominent protagonists into exile; strict measures of censorship were implanted.

For writers, the end of the Grenada revolution meant that they were forced to conform to an old pattern: most of the Caribbean literature has been produced and read in Europe and North America; and this ongoing dependency on metropolitan literary infrastructure was drastically reinforced in the case of post-revolutionary Grenada. The hopeful beginnings made in culture and in education were abruptly stopped.

Two outstanding writers, Merle Collins and Jacob Ross, went to London and had their work published there. Merle Collins' anthology *Because the Dawn Breaks!* (1985) includes her great pieces from the revolutionary period as well as a number of poems reflecting on it retrospectively. The most recurrent image is that of a dream which has come to a bitter end:

you too  
watch now  
with wisdom  
born of living pain  
how we chose  
a golden platter  
to hand across the dreams.<sup>18</sup>

But finally, there is the conviction that the revolutionary achievements can inspire optimism and that the popular confidence gained and celebrated in her earlier poems will eventually contribute to bring about a new dawn.

Jacob Ross produced a collection of short stories, *Song for Simone*. Childhood in rural Grenada is evoked in a series of introspective narrative sketches, which not only highlight the world of the young protagonists but also the plight of the poor peasantry. One of the stories, "Oleander Road", focusses on the consciousness of Damon, a young PRA soldier, during the invasion.

Against his mother's will, Damon decided to resist the invaders, and is now fleeing back home, after narrowly escaping a grenade which killed his fellow- soldiers, "mere children". On his way to Oleander Road, a stream of images, thoughts and episodes of days past floods his mind:

Once, Mr. Jo-Jo almost chopped his hand off; just for a rotten piece of cane he'd tried to steal from the man's garden [...] Had he chopped it off, there would have been no poems, no 'forward-ever' slogans on the walls, houses and culverts of Oleander Road; neither joy nor miracles expressed with pen

<sup>18</sup>"To Trample Dreams", COLLINS 1985:74.

or paint. Not that it mattered now. The time of miracles, of making flowers, grow on stones, and the sun rise in children's eyes, had been crushed beneath a storm of guns. (Ross 1986:99).

Memory becomes even more central, as Damon thinks of a proposal of a young government official eager to develop the country's infrastructure by widening Oleander Road, cutting down the plants after which it was named, and tarring it. But the project did not materialize because of the opposition of the older population, in whose collective memory the oleander symbolizes their ancestors' successful flight from the colonizers.

'If you cut them down and de sap go in your eye o' mouth, you'z a dead man! It spoil you' blood for good! Is like we: we nice until you try to cut us down; then we turn poison.'  
(Ross 1986:102).

These words uttered by Yo-Yo receive an additional meaning in the light of the current invasion. Damon, recalling the strength of the community, finds relief and new confidence. He calms down, remembers one of his old poems and starts thinking up a new one.

Merle Collins's *Angel* (1987) is a recent example of a work in the tradition of the Caribbean *Bildungsroman* which characteristically moves beyond the realm of the protagonist's world and depicts life in a Grenadian rural community during more than three decades. The action of the novel, which starts in 1951 – the end of the white landowners' political control in Grenada – and leads beyond the revolution's collapse in 1983, centres on women: on Angel, a baby at the beginning of the novel and a politically active teacher at the end; on her mother, Doodsie, who is the motor of the McAllister family and instrumental in providing a better future for their four children, and on her friends and relatives.

The sociopolitical processes of the Gairy era ("Leader" in the novel) provide the background for the presentation of the protagonists' daily struggles; Leader is a permanent, but only indirect presence, his disputed personality and some of his actions appear in the narratives and opinions of the novel's characters. Throughout, the perspective is "from below": the joys and hardships of the common people, who are the novel's "collective character" – a term appropriately created by George Lamming for his own novels –, constitute an important focus of the narrative. Another one is Angel's socialization in the primary school, the Catholic convent high school, and finally her stay at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica in the late sixties, which provides a convincing explanation for the active role she will play during the revolution. The rich Grenadian Creole and Patois spoken in the novel, and also employed in interior monologue passages, is one outstanding feature which adds to the realism of *Angel*.

In this context, our main interest lies with the final part of the book, dealing with the rise and fall of the Grenada Revolution. The rising popular discontent with Leader's regime and the ensuing repression set the stage for the coup of the "Horizon boys" in March 1979. Although the popular demonstrations contribute to the weakening of the regime, much of the actual confrontation is perceived by the people as rumours, "a lot of talk flyin aroun" (p. 224);<sup>19</sup> and the news of Leader's overthrow reaches them through the radio announcement – it is only then that they flock out into the streets and celebrate victory. Ever since that moment, skepticism towards, or open dissent with, the new government exists and is portrayed in the novel: "Dey playin dey don know bout ballot box?" (p. 231), say some of Leader's supporters. In her school, Angel has to face a conservative majority among her colleagues, who prevent her from being elected an executive member of the teacher's union. The task she has set herself of winning others for the revolution is arduous. On the other hand, Doodsie and Angel's brothers as well as many of her students are enthusiastic supporters of the new ways. Even Allan, her father, formerly a stubborn follower of Leader, is open to ideas that question his attitudes.

A very telling scene, which – like the episode recalled by Damon in "Oleander Road" – highlights the difficulties of communication between the government agents and the people, is the meeting of the zonal council. After listening to a revolutionary poem by middle-aged Miona – performance poetry in its social setting! –, the participants question two government officials responsible for water supply and road construction. One of them is interrupted and criticized for using the language of a technocrat:

'Mr. Wellington, ah jus want to say dat what you start to say dey ain make no sense, comrade. We want you to break it up! We don want you to wrap up nutting in big word so dat we caan understand. Is information we want, an we want it clear an simple!' [...] 'I jus want to say that I in the literacy programme. Not all of us did go to High School, through no fault o we own. So just give us de ting straight an simple, like, an ting settle'. (p. 249)

Comrade Wellington complies laughingly, and the meeting is successful. Still, the episode, as well as the curious way the official is addressed, show how difficult it is to reach an egalitarian relationship between state representatives and the people.

Paternalistic, even deeply undemocratic attitudes predominating in the party are one major reason for the tragic events of October 1983. (The

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<sup>19</sup>All references are made to the British edition of *Angel* (London, Women's Press, 1987).

external pressures which contribute to bring it about, are alluded to in the symbolic image of the snake, while the successful attack of the chicken-hawk who takes advantage of the fowls' dispersion foreshadows the U.S.-led invasion). But clearly, the perspective of the helpless population, and of the barely better-informed party member, Angel, during the final days reveals just how far the self-proclaimed vanguard party has moved from the people. Rumours about inner-party disputes and the secrecy around them are greeted with a mixture of preoccupation and self-conscious defiance:

'Dey not suppose to hide ting from us. Dey on top but is we dat make Revolution. Revolution counta make if weself din go out on de road an make Leader ban give up. Horizon din even have no big army as such! Is we dat do we ting! [...]' (p. 258).

This mood turns into disbelief and anger at the news of Chief's (Bishop's) arrest; as Angel blames Chief for not complying with the party rules and making the conflict public, Doodsie's friend Melba, a strong Chief follower, takes a resolute stand:

'Look eh, ah don even doubtin Chief wrong to spread ting dat suppose to be in secret Party he agree to. He well wrong too! If dey Party ha to do wid we Revolution, den we suppose to know bout it! [...]' (p. 259).

Two conflicting views of the situation, Doodsie's popular common sense vs. the position of Angel, the young loyal party member, are summarized in the following exchange:

'But they mus listen, Angel. I not sayin is not a confusion in the Party that they know best how to solve but they mus listen to what all of us down here sayin!' 'Is not a question of who down and who up, Mammie.' 'Yes, me chile. Whether you want to see it or not, is always a question of that. Because now what happen? Look eh, when ting just start all of us been speaking with one voice, so was all right then. Was all right because practically everybody was on same side. Now mos people on same side again, saying leggo Chief, but now some of allyou who fight wid us self sayin is because we stupid an we caan see de truth! Perhaps. I not sayin so. But den that is how it is. If a few of you see it an de ress of us don see it, what you go do, tie us down? We moving together of if not, we jus not moving, ah suppose [...]' Oh God, if I say ah don disappointed, ah lie. I believe in dis ting too much for this stupidity to happen. Oh, God! Look we airport! Look we education! Look everything! Look how we movin nice! Lawd! No!' (p. 267).

At this point, Angel – who, in an emotional dialogue with her brother Rupert, points out the dilemma that in the dispute, there are no simple truths, and that the two contending factions are partly to blame – still clings to the naive notion of an identity between the party leadership and the people. She is really helpless and desperately hopes that a solution will be found, but she is unable to say how, because she fails to acknowledge the basic truths voiced by Doodsie, Melba, Rupert and others: the secrecy the party members have surrounded themselves with, their unwillingness to take into account the public opinion asking for Chief's release, i.e. their disdain for the people who overwhelmingly support the revolution because of its achievements. It is this split between those "up" and those "down" which leads to disaster.

Doodsie and Melda join the demonstration leading to the dramatic events of 19 October 1983, which also represent the climax of the novel: the people liberate Chief and, in a mood of excitement and confusion, move to the fort. Ironically – and as in Chile 1973 – the slogan "a People/United/Will never be defeated" proves correct: among the crowd, Doodsie spots a well-known follower of Leader chanting anti-communist slogans. This explosive situation ends with shots being fired, the tanks attacking the crowd in the fort, and the murdering of Chief and many of his supporters, including Melda. The chaotic sequence of events is captured by several shifts of perspective (Angel/authorial voice/members of the crowd/soldiers/Melda/Doodsie/Angel's brother Carl and his friend) and scenic dialogues which effectively convey the dramatic range from the initial joy to the final horror of the situation.<sup>20</sup>

The collective trauma which is enhanced by a dusk- to-dawn curfew guarantees the success of the ensuing invasion. Only a tiny part of the population, even including some of Chief's supporters like Rupert, resist, while most Grenadians are relieved to see the defeat of the short-lived military regime. In the fights and bombings, Angel loses one eye; Rupert's girlfriend is killed.

The book ends on both a sobering and an encouraging note: Allan thinks Grenada should become a crown colony again, because the whites "perhaps [...] know how to rule" (p. 283) and Doodsie returns to religious fatalism: "'Look at the fingers of you han, chile. Some long, some short. You can't change the Lord world!'" (p. 286). Their children, however, are not so easily convinced. In the last chapter, Doodsie manages to keep

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<sup>20</sup>The events of 19 October 1983 have not yet been investigated sufficiently, since the U.S. government continues to withhold important documents. The trial against Bernard Coard and 13 of his codefendants, who were sentenced to death in late 1986, was deeply flawed.

her fowl together: the chicken-hawk has to turn away. And Angel lights a candle of hope.

*Angel* is a brilliant and, through its episodic narrative structure, a multifaceted account of life under Gairyism, and during the four and a half years of the revolution from the perspective of the common people. It is the first Grenadian work in the tradition of the Caribbean social novel in English which, from the 1950s onwards, has frequently been able to articulate the collective consciousness of the people.

## Conclusion

Although the Grenada Revolution was short-lived, it had an impressive impact on the production of literature. Many of the hopes raised by the successes of the new regime found their artistic expression in drama, performance poetry and calypso, which in turn contributed to the most promising aspects of a new political culture. The cultural revolution sparked off by the sociopolitical developments between 1979 and 1983 saw the emergence of writers who continue to produce outstanding poetry and fiction.<sup>21</sup>

However, the failure of the revolution also meant that the social conditions which had made possible the type of performance poetry and calypso presented above vanished overnight. The PRG was replaced with a government willing to give in to U.S. interests in every aspect. The progressive social and educational programs were scrapped, and an outside cultural penetration went on to an extent unknown before: radio and television were put under heavy U.S. influence if not direct control; foreign-sponsored fundamentalist evangelism and anticommunism became rampant. As a result of the widespread disillusionment with the effects of the neoliberal government policies since 1983, the achievements of the revolution were soon remembered with new appreciation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>E.g. Merle Collins' collection of short stories *Rain Darling*.

<sup>22</sup>The political developments in Grenada up to 1990 are presented in FER-GUSON (1990).



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